



Furthering Families

Coping strategies for family stress

We encounter stress in a variety of different situations and in different amounts. Stress can come from ordinary events like heavy traffic or long lines at the grocery store, or crisis events like the loss of a job or a death in the family. How you and your family handle the stressors in your lives, will predict your future success as both individuals and as a family. When the stress in your life seems to affect your functioning, it is time to make a plan that will get you through these tough times. There is no one “prescription” or “cure” for surviving the stressful events in your family’s life, rather, it is a process of figuring out what works best for you this time, as a result of a specific event. These coping strategies will guide you and your family as you work through both everyday stress as well as crisis stressors. Try several of the methods below until you find a strategy that works best for you and your family.

Strategies for coping with stress

- Identify the stressful event as well as your feelings about that event, but do not dwell on the negative feelings. Learn from this event and set up an action plan so that you are able to move forward.
- Develop a support network for yourself and your family. Your personal support system consists of the people who fulfill different roles in your life, for example, a sister who is available to provide emergency child care, or another family going through a similar situation that is able to provide support and encouragement. Use your support system to talk about your feelings and hope you will cope with this stress.
- Keep busy. Volunteer at a soup kitchen, organize a closet, help out in your child’s classroom, or donate time to some other cause that is important to you. This may seem difficult to do in a stressful time, but the busier you are, the less time your mind has to worry about your situation.
- Practice deep breathing. When you feel yourself getting especially stressed or angry, take three deep breaths in and slowly exhale, blowing the stress out of your body.
- Get outside! Taking a five-minute walk around your neighborhood or house can calm you down and begin to help you relax.
- Go to sleep. The average American sleeps an average of 6.9 hours per night on weeknights and 7.5 hours per night on weekends. The Sleep Foundation reported that those who sleep less than six hours on weeknights are more likely to say they are tired, stressed, sad, and angry than those who sleep more than eight hours.

- Take time for you. It is easy to get wrapped up in everyone else's needs and desires, but you will have to set aside time for yourself, so that your family can successfully emerge from this stressful time. Block out an hour each day to do something that is important or relaxing to you. Read a book, go for a walk, or talk with a spouse or friend. You want to be the best spouse/parent/person you can be, and to do that means taking time to rejuvenate yourself.
- Use and develop your sense of humor. By choosing to project a positive attitude, you are more likely to be surrounded by optimistic, caring people.
- Surround yourself with positive, supportive people. Spending time with others who are going through similar situations is not a bad thing, but it may turn negative if your group does not focus on coping with the stress and moving forward. Make an effort to interact and be around people who provide support and encouragement for you and your family.
- Focus on the health of you and your family. In stressful times, some people turn to drugs, alcohol or other substances as an outlet for the negative feelings they may have. Stop or limit your use of alcohol and tobacco; monitor your caffeine intake; eat healthy, balanced meals; and try to exercise at least 30 minutes each day.
- Use your time efficiently. Don't waste time on things that won't move you closer towards your goals and

where you want to be; it can create additional stress in your life. Each day think about what you want to accomplish and how you can make it happen. Having a plan in mind will make it easier to decrease your stress.

- Know when to get professional help. If you or any member of your family is feeling depressed for more than two weeks or the symptoms are severe, seek assistance from an outside source.

Signs of depression

- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- Extended crying
- Feeling lethargic or excessive tiredness, feeling like you do not want to do anything
- Irrational fears and anxiety
- Inability to concentrate
- Change in appetite
- Thoughts of suicide
 - Violent behavior towards yourself or your family
 - Harsh discipline towards children
 - Feeling hopeless and down about yourself or your family
 - More than usual use of alcohol or other drug use
 - Feeling that you are not good enough
 - Inability to cope with situations
 - Lying to others or yourself
 - Acting out behaviors in your children

References

- Pace-Nichols, Mary Anne & Bower, Don. Helping the Client Cope with Stress. Draught in Georgia: University of Georgia. Retrieved on line on 11/28/01.
- Smith, Suzanna & Pergola, Joe. Stress Management: Strategies for Individuals. University of Florida Extension. August 1999.
- Soderman, Anne K. Michigan Farm Families Coping with Stress. Michigan State University. December 1992. Stress: Coping with Everyday Problems. National Mental Health Association. Retrieved on line on 6/18/02.
- Stress Management. Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension. June 2001.
- Weaver, Marsha K. Managing the Stress in Your Life. Kansas State University. March 2001.
- www.sleepfoundation.org

Compiled by **Lisa McGlone**, Associate Program Leader, Family and Consumer Sciences, Michigan State University Extension